

URBAN MILL AND ELEVATOR  
(Cargill Flour Milling)  
200 Urban Street  
Buffalo  
Erie County  
New York

HAER No. NY-258

HAER  
NY  
15-BUF  
47-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Engineering Record  
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

URBAN MILL AND ELEVATOR  
(Cargill Flour Milling)  
HAER No. NY-256

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47

Location: 200 Urban St., Buffalo, Erie County, New York

Date: 1903/1905

Designer: A. E. Baxter Engineering Company

Builder: Steel Storage & Elevator Construction Company

Status: Single bin remains standing

Significance: The grain elevators of Buffalo comprise the most outstanding collection of extant grain elevators in the United States, and collectively represent the variety of construction materials, building forms, and technological innovations that revolutionized the handling of grain in this country.

Project Information: The documentation of Buffalo's grain elevators was prepared by the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), National Park Service, in 1990 and 1991. The project was co-sponsored by the Industrial Heritage Committee, Inc., of Buffalo, Lorraine Pierro, President, with the cooperation of The Pillsbury Company, Mark Norton, Plant Manager, Walter Dutka, Senior Mechanical Engineer, and with the valuable assistance of Henry Baxter, Henry Wollenberg, and Jerry Malloy. The HAER documentation was prepared under the supervision of Robert Kapsch, Chief, HABS/HAER, and Eric DeLony, Chief and Principal Architect, HAER. The project was managed by Robbyn Jackson, Architect, HAER, and the team consisted of: Craig Strong, Supervising Architect; Todd Croteau, Christopher Payne, Patricia Reese, architects; Thomas Leary, Supervising Historian; John Healey, and Elizabeth Sholes, historians. Large-format photography was done by Jet Lowe, HAER photographer.

Historians: Thomas E. Leary, John R. Healey, Elizabeth C. Sholes, 1990-1991

This is one in a series of HAER reports for the Buffalo Grain Elevator Project. HAER No. NY-239, "Buffalo Grain Elevators," contains an overview history of the elevators. The following elevators have separate reports:

NY-240 Great Northern Elevator  
NY-241 Standard Elevator  
NY-242 Wollenberg Grain & Seed Elevator  
NY-243 Concrete-Central Elevator  
NY-244 Washburn Crosby Elevator  
NY-245 Connecting Terminal Elevator  
NY-246 Spencer Kellogg Elevator  
NY-247 Cooperative Grange League Federation  
NY-248 Electric Elevator  
NY-249 American Elevator  
NY-250 Perot Elevator  
NY-251 Lake & Rail Elevator  
NY-252 Marine "A" Elevator  
NY-253 Superior Elevator  
NY-254 Saskatchewan Cooperative Elevator  
NY-256 Urban Elevator  
NY-257 H-O Oats Elevator  
NY-258 Kreiner Malting Elevator  
NY-259 Meyer Malting Elevator  
NY-260 Eastern States Elevator

In addition, the Appendix of HAER No. NY-239 contains brief notations on the following elevators:

Buffalo Cereal Elevator  
Cloverleaf Milling Co. Elevator  
Dakota Elevator  
Dellwood Elevator  
Great Eastern Elevator  
Iron Elevator  
John Kam Malting Elevator  
Monarch Elevator  
Pratt Foods Elevator  
Ralston Purina Elevator  
Riverside Malting Elevator

The George Urban Elevator and Mill that operates today at the intersection of Urban and Kehr streets on Buffalo's near east side is the second of two significant flour milling operations run continuously by the same family for 120 years. The first mill, a small affair, was erected on the edge of Buffalo's downtown on Oak at Genesee Street. It was built in 1852 to enhance the family's wholesale flour business begun six years earlier at the same site.

George Urban and his cousin Henry ran the business until Henry retired, at which time George took Jacob Fisher as a partner. After three years, Fisher withdrew and was followed by John Wittigschlager who endured for seven years. The original founder, George Urban, continued the business until 1870 when he passed control to his son, George Urban, Jr. The company then became George Urban & Son. Within the decade, Edwin G. S. Miller and William Urban became partners as well, and the firm was renamed Urban & Co.<sup>1</sup>

Urban & Co. was so successful that it quickly acquired a wide market as a wholesale merchant mill. From the company's earliest days, it marketed Buffalo-made flour as far east as Boston, Massachusetts, where it sold stock regularly to Sands, Taylor and Wood, the oldest and largest flour jobber in the United States. In 1881 Urban & Co. was the first mill east of Milwaukee to employ the street-roller milling process. The company built its new mill across from its store on Oak Street. The mill was completed in 1882 and had a capacity of 275 barrels per day. Wheat storage capacity was 12,000 barrels.

In 1887 the elder George Urban died. Left without its founder, the company incorporated as a general rather than just family business. It was known until 1903 as the Urban Milling Company and marketed a brand called Liberty Flour designated for the commercial rather than for the consumer trade. The company had a number of "outside" directors, although majority control rested in the hands of the family until 1899. At that time the Oak Street Mill and Elevator merged into the new flour trust, United States Flour Milling Company, with George Urban, Jr. as president. The trust dissolved in bankruptcy soon after, and the Buffalo Mill briefly became part of Standard Milling in a settlement of receivership. The Oak Street plant ceased operations in 1903.<sup>2</sup>

The ground work for an entirely new operation had been laid years before. In 1872 the senior George Urban had been appointed "special guardian" to Augustus Paul who was party to an action between several families, including Paul, and the Western Savings Bank of Buffalo. Settlement of the suit led Judge George W.

Clinton to order the auction of a twenty-three-acre tract of disputed farm land. The auction was a sheriff's sale held by then-sheriff of Erie County, Grover Cleveland. Despite the numerous litigants, only George Urban claimed the property, for which he paid \$3,300. The Urbans were thereafter to remain close friends and political allies of Cleveland, offering their Pine Ridge estate for political gatherings that helped promote Cleveland first to governor of New York then president.<sup>3</sup>

The property bought by auction remained idle until 1903. After the debacle with the flour trust, the Urbans reorganized their operation, incorporating anew as the George Urban Milling Company. The company incorporated not in Buffalo but in the near-eastern suburb of Cheektowaga, where the family's estate was located. However, George Urban Milling sought to engage in grain trading, milling, and the general business of real estate, finance, and the sale of stocks and bonds. It began with \$200,000 in capital issued in 2,000 shares of common stock each with a par value of \$100. The five originating directors were George P. Urban, Jr., Edwin G. S. Miller, Walter P. Cooke, and Charles R. and William R. Huntley.<sup>4</sup>

The presence of Charles Huntley was particularly significant to the future operations of the new company. Huntley began his career as a broker, continuing as a banker working as vice-president of People's Bank of Buffalo and director of the German-American Bank of Buffalo (later re-named Liberty Bank). However, both he and George Urban, Jr. had an unusual secondary interest in common--the development of electric power and its delivery systems. Both men were founders of the Brush Electric Light Co., which erected Buffalo's first municipal lighting plant in the 1880s. Urban and Huntley raised several other small ventures to provide electric power, all of which merged into Buffalo General Electric then into the Cataract Power & Conduit Company.<sup>5</sup>

With Huntley as Urban Milling vice-president, the company moved soon after incorporation to erect a new grain elevator and mill on the property Urban's father had bought at auction. Once a truly rural area, by 1903 the land was on the east side of the city and was served by the New York Central Railroad. In May, 1903, the company secured a building permit for a five-story brick warehouse. A month later, the stockholders voted to mortgage the property, the projected buildings and equipment and all future business income. At the time of the mortgage, the company had raised only \$78,000 of the projected \$200,000 but sought the \$250,000 mortgage secured by twenty-year, 5 percent annual gold bonds, rather than the property. One of the Urban directors and signatories to the mortgage was the company's largest stockholder, Charles E. Clark. He was also secretary of

Buffalo's Loan Trust & Safe Deposit Co., from which the mortgage was to come.<sup>6</sup>

The new Urban Mill and Elevator opened September 22, 1903, and began running at full capacity. It could produce 1,200 barrels of wheat and rye flour daily, although production averaged 1,000 barrels. The elevator had a twelve-compartment, 60,000-bushel storage tank serviced by fifty-one spouts and vertical conveyor belts. It had an overall capacity of 150,000 bushels. Behind all the operations was an important innovation engendered by the Urban-Huntley involvement in power generation; the Urban Mill became the first in western New York to be entirely electrically-powered. As a result, the machinery moving the product through its various processes was entirely self-acting. The mill and elevator were considered model operations of their day.<sup>7</sup>

The company prospered and grew. By 1912 the mill was expanded to produce 1,600 barrels of Urban Liberty Flour and five years later, the directors increased the capital stock to \$500,000. Five days after the stock upgrade, the company took a first and refunding mortgage. Urban used its capital primarily to expand outbuildings during the next several decades; the elevator and mill satisfied the company's needs and had enough capacity to supply its market. In addition to its Liberty Flour line, Urban sold rye flour, Urban's Pie Flour, and Up-and-Up, a self-rising cake flour. Sales were confined to eastern markets in New York, all of New England, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

George Urban Milling weathered the Depression reasonably well. No construction of any kind occurred during those difficult years, but the company kept operating. After the brief recovery in 1936, Urban was faced, as were all producers, with a downturn in consumption the next year. In May the company agreed to extend payoff of the original bonds until 1957. This action cost the company an extra percentage point in annual payments to bondholders but preserved precious capital in deferred settlements on principal. By the end of the Depression but before the boom war years, Urban had already recovered. The company had 120 people working on three eight-hour shifts. By 1946 output had increased to 1,500 barrels per day.<sup>8</sup>

Between the end of World War II and the 1960s, Urban Milling did very well. In 1951 operations were upgraded by rebuilding and expanding the mill. The stockholders voted to increase authorized stock holdings in 1957; capital increased from \$500,000 to \$900,000 in August, and from \$900,000 to \$1.5 million by November. As part of the latter expansion, however, Urban Milling forbade current stockholders from acquiring additional

shares and left disposal of all new shares up to the board of directors. This was clearly a move to prevent the possible centralization of control by stockholders who might attempt a takeover of the lucrative milling company.<sup>9</sup>

Despite such precautions, local control did not last. By 1961, in yet another effort to prevent a takeover, the company reduced its stock par value from \$100 to \$5.00 and the overall capital to \$750,000, a 50 percent devaluation. The strategy of making the company unattractive financially did not succeed, and five years later, reflected a massive shift in control. No Urban family members were willing to focus on the company to the exclusion of other interests. With only one Buffalo-based director left, the entire operation passed to people from Massachusetts or Kansas City, Missouri, representatives of Seaboard Allied Milling who had assumed control over the elevator and mill in 1965 as a Seaboard subsidiary. The company dissolved Urban Milling in 1966. Seaboard was based predominantly in the midwestern wheat-belt states but had a large flour distributing business in New England and New York. Urban was an important addition to the Seaboard organization, giving it an eastern mill which would cut higher-priced shipping on flour and provide closer access to its market.<sup>10</sup>

Before its dissolution, Seaboard operated the complex as George Urban Milling. Under both the Urban and Seaboard names, the midwestern miller upgraded the facility, enlarging the mill and grain bins as well as making changes in subsidiary operations. Seaboard ran the Urban Mill until 1983 when it left Buffalo and sold the property to another miller, Cargill, Inc.<sup>11</sup> Cargill had long been present in Buffalo as one of the top two American grain traders, but the former Urban complex was the first mill that it ever ran in the city.<sup>12</sup> The company maintained the same operations as Urban and Seaboard, functioning as merchant millers selling private-brand flours to commercial markets. Cargill has made no alterations of significance in its decade of operation, but the company runs the mill profitably to the present day.<sup>13</sup>

ENDNOTES

1. Buffalo and Erie County Public Library (BECPL), Scrapbooks, "Industry," Vol. 4, 234; Buffalo Live Wire, 9 (December, 1912): 39.
2. BECPL, Scrapbooks, "Industry," Vol. 4, p. 235; Herman Steen, Flour Milling in America (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison & Company, 1963), 345.
3. Steen, Flour Milling, 345; ECC, Deeds, Liber 330, November 30, 1872, p. 17; BECPL, Scrapbooks, "Industry," Vol. 4, p. 235. All Erie County Clerk documents are listed by date of document origin, not by date of filing, unless otherwise noted.
4. Erie County Clerk, Corporations, George Urban Milling Company, Certificate of Incorporation, March 26, 1903, Box 6528.
5. Who's Who, 1929; Who Was Who, Vol. 1, pt. 2; Who Was Who in New York, 1907. Cataract Power, the chief rival to Niagara Mohawk, was founded by another grain elevator leader, Jacob Schoellkopf. Niagara Mohawk was the corporate victor, but its chief power station serving Buffalo is still called Huntley Station.
6. Buffalo City Hall, Permits and Plans, Permit #15926, May 20, 1903; ECC, Corporations, George Urban Milling Co., Consent to Mortgage, June 10, 1903, Box 6528; Buffalo City Directory, 1903.
7. BECPL, Scrapbooks, "Industry," Vol. 3, pp. 477, 480.
8. ECC, Corporations, George Urban Milling Co., Certificate of Consent to Increase Stock, May 10, 1917, Certificate of consent to Execution and Delivery of George Urban Milling Co., May 15, 1917, Box 6528; BECPL. Scrapbooks, "Industry," Vol. 5, p. 61.
9. ECC, Corporations, George Milling Co., Certificate of Consent to Extension, May 22, 1937, Box 6528; BECPL, Scrapbooks, "Industry," Vol. 5, p. 61; Vol. 6, p. 159.
10. ECC, Corporations, George Urban Milling Co., Certificate of Amendment of Certificate of Incorporation, August 2, 1957, November 1, 1957; Steen, Flour Milling in America, 345.
11. ECC, Deeds, Liber 7322, June 1, 1965, pp. 467-68; Corporations, George Urban Milling Co., Certificate of Dissolution, November 22, 1967, Box 6528; Steen, Flour Milling in America, 319.
12. For earlier Cargill histories see Superior, Electric, and the Pool elevators.



13. ECC Deeds, Liber 9208, March 10, 1983, pp. 552-53. Telephone interview with plant manager, October 29, 1990.

SOURCES

Buffalo City Directory, 1903.

Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, scrapbooks, "Industry," Vol. 3, pp. 477, 480; Vol. 4, pp. 234-5; Vol. 5, p. 61; Vol. 6, p. 159.

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Building Permits and Plans, 301 Buffalo City Hall.  
#15926 (May 20, 1903)

Erie County Clerk, Records, Erie County, NY.

Steen, Herman. Flour Milling in America. Minneapolis: T.S. Denison & Company, 1963.

Who Was Who, Vol. 1, pt. 2.

Who Was Who in New York, 1907.

Who's Who, 1929.

APPENDIX

Foundations: Spread footings

Basement: Tunnel type

Bins: One 40' diameter, 56' high free-standing steel bin divided into 12 circular sectors by radial wood walls consisting of 2 x 6 or 2 x 8 planks laid flat and spiked together as with cribbed bins; Instore through a turnhead under the bin roof; they may have had flat unhoppered bottoms. A similar bin of twice the capacity was added soon after; As there is no other record of the 8 bins built by SS&EC in 1905, this may have been a single bin divided into 8 sectors. Four free standing circular bolted steel bins were added in 1990. These have a capacity of 17,500 bushels each, with an instore screw conveyor. This installation is representative of what has become very prevalent in the grain industry. The bins are composed of standardized factory-made components, easily field assembled and available in sizes 500,000bu and above. Instore and outstore conveyors are often in the open and are screw or bulk flow type. The open gallery arrangement is also used for many newer concrete elevators.

REFERENCES: A. E. Baxter Engineering Company, plans; Personal Interview with Mr. Doug Ramsey of Cargill; Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, 1916; Personal Correspondence with Mr. Henry H. Baxter, 31 July 1992.